

GEORGE MACDONALD.

The "coming man" in the field of fiction is believed to be George Macdonald, and as his writings are beginning to largely engage the attention of the reading public, the following critical notice of his works by Samuel W. Duffield will be read with interest:—

In something less than three years we have become acquainted with a new name in literature. It has drifted to us across the Atlantic, and with it has come a vague hint of a personality whose future we may know more. The works of this hand and brain are mainly in a poetical prose, and an occasional release into verse. His books sell largely, and he is better known as "the author of 'Annals of a Quiet Neighborhood'" than as George Macdonald.

Lately he appears among us as the editor of 'Good Words for the Young,' always, however, forgetting the prefix "Rev.," and carrying that balancing "L.L.D." as "the draught" of his own Robert Falconer carried the weight which steadied her in mid-air. We hear of him as a tall man, of earnest demeanor and shaggy beard, proclaiming now and then in clear, forcible speech his own peculiar doctrine of "righteousness, temperance, and justice to come." He is reported to have the ear of his audience on these rare occasions, and certainly, if the humanity of his books is a test, he deserves it.

As far back as "Phantastes, a Fairy Romance," his imaginative style seems to have begun. "Within and Without," a poem of about the same date, shows more deliberate thought—perhaps more metaphysics than poetry. But these two books, which were at the beginning of his fame (as indeed he had no other), are now the composition of "The Green Hand, a Short Yarn," have been entirely displaced to American readers by other and more mature productions.

First, we had as reprints "Alec Forbes of Howglen," and "Guild Court, a London Story."

To these succeeded the importation of "The Disciple and Other Poems," another volume entitled "Unspoken Sermons," and "Annals of a Quiet Neighborhood," with its sequel, "The Seaboard Parish." Next came "David Elginbrod" and "Robert Falconer," both reprints; and current literature was at the same date refreshed by a series of articles on the "Miracles of Our Lord," in the 'Sunday Magazine,' and by "Rosald Bannerman's Boyhood," and "At the Back of the North Wind," in 'Good Words for the Young.'

In attendance upon these, Mr. Macdonald sent forth a volume of the 'Sunday Library,' uniform with Charles Kingsley's 'Hermit' and 'The Yarn,' a 'Pulpit of St. John the Divine,' which was styled "The English Antiphon." It is a most important contribution to our knowledge of the singers and songs of the English Church.

In all these books there is a vein of consistent, fresh, original thought, often expressed in language extremely apt and powerful. It tends towards the religious at all times, and particularly it tends to that blunt plainness as to hypocrisy and cant and sham of every kind in which our dear departed masters Thackeray and Dickens took the lead. But to compare Mr. Macdonald with either, or with both, would be unfair. He has not the same elements in him. He cannot, if he would, write in their light, easy, man-of-the-world style, which, like Saladin's scimitar, cuts deep and to the quick.

As his is now a considerable place among us, I have thought that a resume of his method and writings might aid in a fuller appreciation of the man's actual talent—not to say his genius of a certain sort.

His novels are, with one exception, Scotch in scene, and with a great deal of the dialect of the same—a boy, who, while a hearty, active fellow, nevertheless has his fanatical thoughts. This fine fellow's life possesses many points of humor—especially in "Alec Forbes"—and introduces scenes and pictures which are at times simply exquisite. This education of the hero evolves the aesthetic from its lurking-place within him. A female presence casts a halo of protecting beauty and goodness over his path. He has stalwart male friends—adherents of the cast-iron theology of the North, or else secessionists of a droll and facetious turn, in whom he detects the good beneath the bad. He generally identifies or finds in the horizon of his career some forsaken boy, of a curious devotedness. Relatives or near friends, of the pure Scottish type, are around him, who, like Falconer's grandmother, have warm hearts under bosoms calmly cold. And, as nearly as words can achieve it, we have a process of photography going on from the day we set eyes upon our principal actor until he goes off the stage, with the closing of the book.

For all this, Mr. Macdonald's abundant observation, fruitful fancy, and thorough sympathy fit him especially well. He leaves out such eccentric persons as Count Halko, and "David Elginbrod," who practices mesmerism and electrical bewilderments, his characters stick to common facts, and invest ordinary things with the charm of spicy conversation and a minuteness which never degenerates into tedious recapitulation. Wit sparkles in the speech of Cosmo Cupples as naturally as a brook laughs in the sun, and you may be profoundly sure that the talk will ripple freshly up whenever any obstruction appears in the channel.

The books are of their own kind. They are professedly of high intention—the later ones, by which I do not mean our latest reprints, being the best. One cannot read them without being stimulated to something nobler and purer, for they may honestly be called both. They are a mine of original and quaint similitudes, and their deep perceptions of human nature are certainly remarkable. To have realized some of the scenes as he has, Mr. Macdonald must have known the student-life of Aberdeen, and the boy-life of a little Scotch town. Nature, from smallest to largest, must have been carefully under his notice. And in the world, so wide as it is to all of us, he has seen the little flower grow up in a life, or the great storm sweep over it. This is notably the case in the "Annals of a Quiet Neighborhood," and its sequel, the latter being by no means the best. Here he is shown as a close pathologist. Disease of mind and disease of body, as influencing or off-setting each other, he has acutely studied. As a matter of art, the London Spectator was right when it called this application of knowledge in this book "something wonderful." The sentences are sometimes as like the Great White Nile had ceased to be a navigable river. It appeared that the floating rafts of marsh vegetation which, in 1855, caused an obstruction in the river between the mouths of the Ghazal and Giraffe tributaries, having been neglected by the Khartoum authorities, had increased so much as to form now an impenetrable barrier. The vast masses of floating islands continually brought down by the stream had produced a new district many miles in extent, beneath which flows the current of the river. The slave traders, thus shut out from direct communication with the field of their enterprise, had, however, dis-

credit that in an age of loose literature he is like Scott and Dickens and Thackeray, pure-minded. He writes better English (because more imaginative and loftier) than Charles Reade, or any of that ilk. And while Wilkie Collins outdoes him in plot, he outdoes Wilkie Collins and the rest of the plotters in delicacy and sweetness of touch. But it is already too plain that (unless he gets more leisure) the work which he has done, and which the world has on its bookshelves, will be the best of his doing. Should George Macdonald rise hereafter above this present point, high and good as it is, he will merit and receive distinguished praise. And, as a man hardly at the entrance of middle-life, there is no reason why this should not be. His hand has not lost its cunning, and his eye is still undimmed.

DR. MACKENZIE'S "LIFE OF DICKENS." The "Life of Charles Dickens," by R. Shelton Mackenzie, LL.D., published by T. B. Peterson & Brothers, is the best biography of the deceased novelist that has yet appeared either in the United States or in England, and we are glad to be able to announce that it is meeting with an extensive sale. The November number of Harper's Magazine has the following appreciative notice of this work:—

There is no American author, who hardly know any English author, whom we would sooner select to write a biography of Charles Dickens than Dr. Shelton Mackenzie. For over half a century he has lived in familiar fellowship with the *literati* of his time. He has that peculiar cast of mind which seizes upon significant incidents, treasures them up, and, as needed, reproduces them. He is, too, a literary critic—professionally so—and although his criticisms are not and do not assume to be profound, they are pervaded by a personality, a sympathetic appreciation of the writer's aim and spirit, a knowledge, in short, of the man, which is, in some sense, the first condition of either accurate or interesting criticism. His critical writings, like his conversational, are always lively, entertaining, anecdotal. His "Life of Charles Dickens" (T. B. Peterson & Bros.) might almost be termed reminiscences. It contains, of course, a great deal we all knew before. The birth, the parentage, the first captivity of the public by "Pickwick," the order in which the subsequent stories followed each other, their literary qualities and characteristics; in all this there is nothing with which the newspapers have not already familiarized us. Of the great novelist's interior life and character, of what he was in his family and with his children, what in society and in religious conviction and association, what not merely as an author, but as a man, it tells us but little. Of that unfortunate but still inexplicable separation between himself and his wife it gives us really no information, except the scanty and unsatisfactory information afforded long since by Charles Dickens's public card. But of the novelist as a novelist; of his habits of mind and methods of composition; of the current criticism of his day; of the praise and blame which his succeeding works provoked from the critics and the public; and especially of the sources from which Dickens obtained his power, Dr. Mackenzie tells us a good deal. One secret of Dickens's success lay, doubtless, in the fact that he made real characters sit for the portraits which he drew, albeit he idealized them in the drawing. This we knew before; but we did not know how to detect the same in his public card. But of the most entertaining chapter of the book, Dr. Mackenzie explains to us. Tony Weller was a coachman who used to drive between London and Portsmouth. Tracy Tupman—a certain Mr. Winters—was a well-known habitue of Hyde Park. The "fat boy" existed in veritable flesh and blood, the servant of a gate-keeper in Essex, between London and Chelmsford. Mrs. Ann Ellis, who kept an eating-house in Doctors' Commons, sat for the portrait of Mrs. Bardell. Mr. Justice Stareleigh was hardly a caricature of Sir Stephen Gaskell, the publication of "Oliver Twist," with its sharply-cut portraiture of Mr. Fang, police magistrate, resulted in the removal of A. S. Laing, Esq., from the office which, by his brutality, he disgraced, and from which no previous pressure had sufficed to eject him. All the world knew that the Cheeryble Brothers were the shadows of the Brothers Grant, cotton spinners and calico printers near Manchester; but it is a new revelation that the characteristics of Mrs. John Dickens, Charles's mother, are unmistakable in good, poor, dotting, foolish Mrs. Nickleby; while traits less amiable, yet that awaken the friendly feeling more akin to pity than contempt, in Micawber and Turveydrop, were borrowed from his father, who struggled throughout life in perpetual financial difficulty like the one, but like the other, never failed to maintain the dignity of his department. Mr. Bucket, the detective, passes for Inspector Field, under whose protecting escort the great author made more than one tour of the wretched regions he so graphically described. The rascally but accomplished Mr. Julius Slipton, whose crimes in "Hunted Down" surpass belief, is the exact *fac simile* of Thomas Griffiths Wainwright, the story of whose incredible crimes, penned by Mr. Dickens himself, forms one of the papers which help to swell Dr. Mackenzie's volume to its goodly size of four hundred and eighty-four pages. Dr. Mackenzie has not altogether done himself justice. The public demand a good book now, rather than a better book by-and-by. And Dr. Mackenzie, writing to supply the demand, has not permitted himself the necessary time to collect his material or to arrange it with the care and method of a whole book, begun, it is said, on the 14th of June, was finished on the 23d of July. But though it is probable that some more elaborate and thoroughly digested biography will supplant his work in the future, it is certain that for the present want there is no biography more entertaining, and probably none more accurate, than that which Dr. Shelton Mackenzie has given to the American public.

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